

Church Planning and Adjustment

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Church planning usually refers to the initiation of new congregations. The locale may be a slowly growing suburb where four or six denominations may each be determined to plant a mission when only one is needed, or a rapidly developing community of huge proportions where opportunity must be grasped by the forelock and no denomination is ready to occupy the field. Planning also brings to mind the specialized needs of racial, national, age, vocational and other groups or associations of people. It refers to the needs of sparsely populated communities where children grow up without pastoral care and the opportunity for common worship. Planning may refer to the still more difficult areas where community does not even exist; only a few of God's children are there.

Church adjustment is the re-thinking of programs already long in process. Population changes may have occurred in a neighborhood, whether rural or urban, so that the churches are folding up like morning glories in the evening. The entire approach of the churches to their constituency needs re-examination and re-direction. The inroads of industry and commerce may require the re-deploying of church forces to better advantage. Plans that were sound a generation ago may be entirely outmoded. Readjustment is always in order because plans are never final in a changing world.

When disaster knocks loudly enough and everyone perceives that escape is unlikely, there is usually a wild fruitless scramble on an individualistic, piecemeal basis either to move out or to make adjustment to the new conditions. Churches which move to greener fields are often those with sufficient resources to meet changing conditions, and those which remain in the difficult areas are often the weaklings which can make no significant adjustment. Thus Protestantism loses its significance where the need is greatest.

Some churches which remain in difficult situations recognize the changes in the community and their own inability to adjust. They appraise their usefulness in the past with ego-satisfaction and are content to die quietly. Others of more heroic nature reflect the planless procedure and hyperactivity of urban American Protestantism. Without regard to the needs of a changing constituency, these churches vie with one another to establish schedules of weekly meetings that look for all the world like railroad timetables. Their destination, however, may not be apparent. When a new auxiliary society is added to the schedule, the church bulletin speaks of "progress," and when societies are consolidated, the same evaluation is made. I am often reminded of the new minister who called upon the deacon across the street to help move the peonies from the foundation of the church to either side of the long bare walk. With the task completed the deacon wiped his brow and remarked: "Funny how one preacher puts the peonies along the foundation and the next one always puts them along the walk."

THE COUNCIL'S TASK

Meeting the spiritual and social needs of each community in these United States is worth more in God's sight than all the church names listed in denominational year-books and all the auxiliary societies in every church. We are living in a day of unprecedented change, of planned and unplanned demolition, of milling around, of excessive mobility—in-migration and out-migration, a kaleidoscopic whirl of social change with significant eddies in everyone's backyard. While the Protestant denominations are giving encouraging evidence of a new concern for community and a determination to plan together to meet spiritual and social needs, it is to the councils of churches that they must turn for the broad vision and the skilled generalship in each community. It is the council which

can see most objectively the sum of all the parts. To attempt to understand the strong currents and the eddies of social change, what they are and what they mean to the community and to the church, is an unavoidable part of the task of councils in this generation.

The recognition of problems of church planning and adjustment in their earlier stages was a major stimulus for the council movement. Councils were established to be more than agencies of cooperation. The preamble of the Constitution of the Massachusetts Council, founded in 1902, calls for the elimination of waste in the organization and maintenance of the churches in the State. The Rev. E. Tallmadge Root, addressing the first meeting of the Executive Committee of the Federal Council of Churches, declared, "A State Federation is a joint committee appointed by the denominational bodies of the State, to learn all the facts and assay all the factors, in order to overcome our overlapping, our overlooking and our overorganizing." How that statement has endured since 1909—"to overcome our overlapping, our overlooking and our overorganizing"! Think of its pertinence in the light of today's urban and rural problems, shifting populations and challenging fields for church extension.

FACTS FOR CHURCH PLANNING

The value of clearance in church planning by means of denominationally representative comity committees has been apparent for many years. It is commonly recognized that when two or three denominations begin mission work in a new community capable of supporting only one church, all will struggle along for years, wasting money, energy and manpower in competitive effort. It is better that the competition take place in the committee. When facts are not on hand, when committees are forced to rely upon hearsay and superficial observation, bickering, bargaining and bludgeoning are more often the order of

comity procedure than consideration of the needs of a new community. After one such committee had been deadlocked for five years in an effort to allocate responsibility for ministry in a new community to one denomination and had considered another area for three years, it became a strong advocate of a research and survey department to supply the facts for church planning.

The traditional program of comity committees has been to avoid a conflict of churches so that each might have an improved chance of success. It has been more negative than positive in its approach. A positive approach is to know the spiritual and social needs of each new community, the available population for Protestant churches, the prospects for further growth, the relationships of the people to neighboring communities and existing churches, their degree of receptiveness to the various denominations—in short, a community-centered approach. A necessary corollary to this approach is the ability to keep abreast of the lines of population movement, augmenting periodic census figures of Federal and state governments with tabulations of local building permits to reveal the continuance of old trends and the beginnings of new movements.

In Massachusetts and other sections of the country where a research staff has been employed under Council auspices, church planning has been placed on a positive, factual basis. Results in Massachusetts after three years have included a greatly increased number of allocations for new areas, a significant relocation of a church from an overchurched area to a new community and another in process, many applications withdrawn after careful studies showed the proposed churches were not needed and they would not be likely to succeed. Several local efforts to establish branch churches have been kept within the realm of good comity procedure by promptly conducting reconnaissance studies requested by denominational

administrators. Factual data have enabled the administrators to cope with the evangelistic zeal of misguided ministers and laymen. The denominations established a property fund so that the Council might under certain conditions take option on choice properties in new communities which are planned or under construction. A contractor, developing a planned community for 3,500 people, willingly offered to give an acre of land in the heart of the development when approached by a staff member who represented the cooperating Protestant denominations. A community-centered program of church planning makes the Council the initiator of plans for church extension rather than requiring it to act as policeman among conflicting forces.

UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINING COMMUNITY

If the church is to cultivate a new field successfully, it must study the soil with care. The necessity for study is just as vital if the soil appears exhausted. Church adjustment in the face of declining opportunity requires adequate knowledge of the setting in which the church functions, whether that setting be a rural hinterland, a small town or a complex metropolitan area. The community cannot be understood without understanding all aspects of it, including its other churches, the kind of people which constitute it and their religious connections, the mobility of its population, its cultural and economic status, its private and public services, the pattern of its morality, the elements which lift its common life and those which constitute a downward drag.

In so far as the data on which local church adjustments are to be made have to do with the status and trends of the community, they can best be gathered and interpreted cooperatively. A decline in the community birth rate, the encroachment of industry or the loss of a market for

the town's chief product, a low level of education or an influx of Roman Catholics have no greater respect for Methodists than for Congregationalists. All are affected by the same social and economic changes. Moreover, whatever the differences in doctrine and polity among the Protestant churches, they perform certain basic functions, meet certain basic needs and operate with certain basic physical and administrative requirements. The techniques for appraising their success and disclosing their problems are inevitably similar, and the status of one can be understood more easily in the light of the condition of the others.

Pastors and connectional officials ask about the same questions when church adjustment is under consideration. What are the spiritual needs of the area? How have the churches been conditioned by social change? What adaptations should be made by the churches? Do the trends indicate a healthy future? Which aspects of community life are injurious to the spirit and to what extent can the churches overcome their influence? If the churches are not self-supporting, can they be made so? In so far as subsidies are needed, how much is needed? If additional staff is required, what special qualifications are desirable? What is the overall Protestant picture in this area and how do our churches fit into the total pattern? Would a more cooperative Protestant strategy be advantageous?

Answers to these and many other questions are considered as prerequisite to any fundamental program of church adjustment by representatives of any or all denominations. Here is common ground which falls very naturally into the realm of a council of churches. What are the councils able to do in supplying the facts upon which fundamental Protestant strategy may be formulated, or even decisions made as to the future of a single cluster of churches in a relatively small area?

SPECIALIZED PERSONNEL

By one means or another, an increasing number of councils are organizing research departments to implement their programs of church planning and adjustment. In Chicago, New York, Washington, San Francisco, Southern California and Massachusetts, specialized personnel are providing the answers to a multitude of questions. These councils are helping local and denominational leadership to be aware of the trend in church and community, and to plan intelligently for the present and the future. Here is the obvious goal toward which state councils and those in major urban centers should strive in this day of rapid social change—the employment of full-time staff in this field.

The need for cooperative church planning and adjustment is being widely recognized. The problem involved is twofold: lack of local resources and a scarcity of trained men. "Can we afford it?" is the perennial question regarding all constructive programs. At the turn of the century, business and industry asked the same question with reference to research—"Can we afford it?" The First National Bank of Boston made this observation in a recent issue of its monthly periodical:

"The best evidence of the profitableness of effective research is found in the record of American business enterprise. This record shows that industries which applied scientific methods and adopted modern appliances . . . have without exception made the greatest progress. . . . It is not a question whether a firm can afford to carry on research work. Not to do so, on the contrary, is to gamble with survival."

If, in its broadest sense, research means "Yankee ingenuity gone scientific," that might explain why the Yankee churches in Massachusetts are now investing \$17,000 yearly in a research program. But the question is: "Can others afford it?" May I suggest looking into the number of mission churches in your area still being subsidized after ten or fifteen years of operation. If only four or five

of these problems represent mistakes in location, the sum of their subsidies would probably be sufficient to support a research department. Instead of making four or five more mistakes in allocations for new churches during the next few years, try a research department. If you are located in an area requiring adjustment more than planning, obtain lists of the subsidized churches of each denomination and spot them all on a map. Note the clusters that may indicate overchurching and virtual competition. Adjustment based on careful study of two or three clusters of subsidized churches should save sufficient annual subsidies to finance your research department in generous fashion. These are purely practical considerations entirely apart from the blessings of a more effective Protestant ministry which is the primary factor, and the glory and dignity of self-supporting congregations with full-time pastors contented in their work and adequately supported.

A more serious problem facing the program of church planning and adjustment is the scarcity of trained personnel. There is not much you can do with financial resources if you cannot find a trained man. Data must be reliable and conclusions must be valid. Recently a minister came to my office and said: "My average attendance is 130 but," he hesitated, "I seldom reach the average." He instinctively knew that the figure he gave did not represent the concept he was trying to impart. This problem of training men theologically and scientifically has received little attention outside of Chicago. Now the Massachusetts staff, after teaching several experimental courses, is opening a training center with the cooperation and facilities of three seminaries and two universities.

RESEARCH AND SURVEY COMMITTEES

Pending adequate resources and staff, what can a council do toward building a program of church planning and adjustment upon a solid basis? What can the smaller councils do? Some have profitably organized research

and survey committees. These committees are alert for the appearance of new reports or surveys disclosing the current status and changes in one or more aspects of the community's life. A survey sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce, the report of a utility company, a government report on migration in and out of the county, a social agency report—what is their significance for the community and its churches? The Council's survey committee gathers and interprets such reports for the churches.

The committee members should fully tap the resources of universities, seminaries and colleges. There are a multitude of community studies in academic halls which are never used to advantage, and there are always students seeking new subjects for academic theses. Let the committee make contact with professors and explore together the need for community and church studies. Do not ignore the social agencies. They are equally interested in community studies. The committee should explore the resources of the local library and become acquainted with the wealth of United States census data.

If a religious census is sponsored by the Council, let the committee make arrangements for tabulating the valuable data on the cards before the churches use them for visitation evangelism. There is a wealth of information about the community on a well-constructed census card. Some of the most obvious values are a check-up on population movement, a picture of the religious affiliation of the residents in various neighborhoods and the area of ministry of each church. The Massachusetts Council has produced a pamphlet giving detailed instructions for using volunteer workers in conducting a religious census and fully utilizing the results. Churches or local councils desiring to employ a proficient person for taking a census, instructing volunteers or tabulating data are referred to one who was trained by the Council staff to render such aid.

If a survey committee is alert, it may gather a large store of data on population change, social trends, neighborhood characteristics, progress and retrogression in the life of the churches, all of which is invaluable for intelligent church planning and adjustment. Then, the committee should use every opportunity for educating the ministry to the need for understanding the church and its field of labor. Some of us have had thrilling experiences in conducting series of local conferences on the problems of the city church. Perhaps the greatest opportunity to begin making an intelligent approach toward an inclusive Protestant strategy is to obtain a reconnaissance study of your entire community from the Committee for Cooperative Field Research. If such a study is followed up by the employment of a full-time researcher or the organization of a permanent local committee of research and survey, your council will be in a position to give statesmanlike direction for church planning and adjustment.

A GLIMPSE AT THE FUTURE

As one looks down the years and sees a trained research staff in every major council, there will be a fund of expert knowledge and experience in every area of the country which a national staff could never gather. All the personnel, on whatever level, will constitute a fellowship of leaders for church planning and adjustment. The national center might then devote itself more fully to the urgent need for non-geographical research and answer the larger questions regarding the churches' ministry in a changing social order. Which are the most successful patterns for reducing the number of churches in over-churched areas? How can the church work successfully with special occupational groups? What are the patterns of social adjustment and the religious needs of southern Negroes moving to northern cities? How can the church reach second-generation Italian youth who are in the process of rebelling from the cultural and religious values of

their immigrant parents? There are hundreds of such questions, perhaps thousands, which an adequate national staff, given the cumulative knowledge and experience of local researchers, could answer objectively and wisely.

The ministrations of the church need not continue to lag a generation or two behind changing social conditions. Whether it be the broad strategy of denominational and inter-denominational units or church adjustment in a small urban neighborhood or a sparsely settled rural area, the place of survey and research is determinative. It can give an objective analysis of needs and program and can reveal how the resources of the Church may be used most effectively in the current situation.

PRINCIPLES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Now someone might like to say: "That all sounds very well, but there is a wide gulf between strategy and the accomplishment of it." In Massachusetts we are successfully effecting church adjustment by employing principles of action research largely developed at the Research Center for Group Dynamics. The concepts of action research are being increasingly recognized by all researchers in the Church, whether or not the terminology is used. It is generally agreed that if practical results are to be achieved, outsiders should enter a community for study only when their help is earnestly desired by the insiders. Outsiders and insiders should collaborate in defining the area of study and the problems involved. It is desirable that resident leadership participate in the study process. The researcher should not play the role of an omniscient expert inasmuch as he aims to do things with people rather than to them.

A community is brought together by a unity of interaction. That unity cannot be achieved by direction from outside forces. It must come from the recognition of common values and goals and joint participation in their conservation and achievement. Direction from experts, whether researchers or administrators, may have tem-

porary success in changing the superficial patterns of institutions. Such outside direction cannot achieve permanent results because it does not alter the basic values and goals which are dependent upon the unity of interaction. In fact, outside pressure tends to solidify the undesirable and disrupting elements in the community pattern.

Methods of undertaking collaborative research to effect church adjustment among long-established congregations are still in the experimental stage. In Massachusetts we never superimpose a study upon any community, but we have requests for more studies than we can undertake in five years. Our aim is to contribute technical skill and indirect leadership to a community endeavor which in the end will produce informed congregations capable of adapting and utilizing their local resources to meet community needs. To achieve this goal we do not start a project by calling together a hundred local people to convince them of its value. That is to pile a heap of snow which has no cohesion. Instead, we roll a snowball of local leadership by beginning with a core of one or two interested leaders and seeing that they have occasion to involve others until an interested and widely representative study group emerges. As the leaders seek the assistance and cooperation of people in all congregations, they express common interests to one another which may formerly have been inarticulate and so lay the foundation for the emergence of all groupings—"a consciousness of kind." It is only on the basis of a recognition of common interests that a community project can be effected.

To insure practical results, a project must be defined, agreed upon and carried out by the local group in democratic fashion. Minority viewpoints should not be ignored lest local animosities be strengthened. The emotional factors in the group are of primary concern. Providing a democratic group setting for the research process substantially reduces prejudices and antagonisms.

The committee members participate actively in every stage of the project and involve the maximum number of other church members to aid them. One local leader recently spent nineteen consecutive working days on an action research project. Findings of sub-committees are portrayed graphically on large charts and subjected to critical examination and evaluation by the group. Planning may begin anywhere in the process, usually with some general objective. Additional data and further discussion frequently results in a modification of the original idea. A full-scale strategy for the churches crystallizes slowly in group discussion. If the group has involved other church members in the process and continually disseminated its findings in church bulletins and parish meetings, the final report is likely to find acceptance as a community production.

By this process the researcher yields the aim of achieving maximum perfection in minimum time by means of his own special revelations in order to allow the local people to gain a sense of unity through appreciation of their common setting and common problems. He suggests sources of data and methods of study and may act as helper. He encourages the group to seek basic causes and attempts to transfer its emotional involvement from the institutions to the purpose of them. Among his primary concerns is the elimination of emotional factors which prevent adequate functioning of the group and stand in the way of willingness to solve problems. If he has an understanding of group dynamics, he may often interpret to the group the underlying tensions which are influencing its discussion so that the group gains increasing insight into its own behavior.

If the strategy evolved by the local committee does not evidence scientific perfection, it is usually because the group is incapable of accepting perfection. If a perfect strategy had been prescribed for the churches, they would

probably have rejected all of it. The plan they evolved with the researcher's indirect leadership will most likely be within their capacity to accept and carry out. The researcher does not destroy local self-esteem nor produce frustration and resentment by imposing his objective judgments of local failure. Instead, the local church leaders gain confidence in their own abilities through their investigative, evaluative, interpretive and adjustment activities.

Action research, as practiced by the Massachusetts staff, aims at the creation of conditions which will aid the local groups to release their own adjustment mechanisms and adapt the institutional structure to meet the needs of people. Among the most basic concepts is the recognition that tested wisdom is of little consequence unless it emerges in a particular community as a plan newborn and nurtured by the parties concerned who feel the pride of possession and the responsibility for successful achievement. It is the people who effect changes—not researchers and generally not administrators. The U. S. Patent Office has registered thousands of improvements which never come to anything because the people did not adopt them. How much the technician gives to a community study is important but how much the people give of themselves to the effort is more important because in the end the results depend upon their adaptations. The question is not how to make a plan for our churches, but how to help the people make a plan for their churches.

In Massachusetts, the denominational and city mission administrators constitute the research department. They meet regularly with the researchers to discuss the most recent findings and the progress of local study committees. When a local group after much effort brings forth an overall strategy for its own community, the administrators have already anticipated it. When each local

group takes the common strategy to its church administrator for approval and counsel, the outcome is usually a happy one. Significant adjustments are likely to be made because both insiders and outsiders have an intelligent and factual understanding of the churches, the field in which they are working and the forces which are shaping its destiny.

SOME LOCAL ADJUSTMENTS

The night before I left Boston, the leaders of the churches and Protestant agencies in the West End of the city unanimously agreed upon a strategy which involves the relocation of a Methodist church, the yoking of a Methodist church with a Baptist community center, the closing of another Protestant community center, the initiation of a group-work program for the aged by a skilled social worker under local church auspices, an exciting new program to combat a high rate of juvenile delinquency, the creation of a neighborhood council of churches to undertake a long list of common projects among which is the employment of a parish worker to carry on a continuous program of visitation evangelism in a large area of rooming houses. These are only a few indications of a thoroughgoing strategy, commonly agreed upon after a year of intensive study, which will mean significant adjustments for each church in the area. Will they make the adjustments? I believe they will because this is their own creative enterprise. Because intelligent leadership has been trained, the churches will continue to work and plan together for a long while to come.

In other sections of Boston more startling adjustments have already been made. A community with only two small Protestant churches, no resident Protestant minister for twelve years, and an annual subsidy of \$1,500 merely to maintain the status quo now has a federated church with a full-time resident minister. It is a self-supporting church which is growing rapidly by new accessions. More

remarkable is the fact that these churches which federated to meet the need of their community are Episcopal and Congregational. The minister is a Congregational minister who was confirmed last week by the Episcopal bishop so that he might have dual denominational standing.

Are there practical results from a research program? One denomination saved \$75,000 earmarked for renovating a building no longer needed. A mission board sold an outmoded building for \$10,000 and invested the money in one of Boston's most successful Negro churches where it was badly needed. An outstanding phenomenon was the federation of an endowed English-speaking Episcopal church with two Italian-speaking mission congregations, Methodist and Congregational. After studying and planning together for a year these three churches voted unanimously to federate on a thoroughly democratic basis despite differences of denomination, nationality, language and social class. They have decreased their overhead and increased their staff in a needy urban area. Denominational subsidies of \$1,000 annually have been released. Did we develop informed local leadership and aid Christian growth in this blighted community? Here are a few excerpts from an article by the rector of the Episcopal church who, after fourteen years in the community, was elected senior pastor of the federated church. He writes in the monthly diocesan periodical as follows:

"Suppose you lived in a community in which your church was caught in the ebb-tide of a population shift, so that you could no longer think of progress, but rather how near the end was with the numbering of your days.

"Suppose there were thirteen Protestant churches in your community with a combined Sunday attendance of 750 and a seating capacity of more than 3,000.

"Suppose that your church was situated in an area of poor health, high juvenile delinquency . . . and the churches were not doing much about it because they were absorbed with the problems of excessive overhead and support of massive church buildings, with constantly declining congregations.

Suppose your church schools were showing a constantly declining attendance and enrollment. Suppose your young people were being

discouraged more and more because their groups were becoming smaller and their isolation more complete. . . .

"Suppose your churches were operating on a standard of efficiency such as no secular business could exercise and exist for long.

"You would try to find an answer, wouldn't you? And in doing this you would be trying to eliminate a tremendous waste, a tremendous inefficiency, a tremendous duplication, and trying to bring effectiveness where it was lacking.

"Such was the situation in East Boston, and the churches did try to find such an answer. In seeking it they did not appeal to sentiment or to conjecture but to facts as they were. . . . After assembling these facts in what had a striking resemblance to a telephone directory, they turned the study committee into a planning committee and formed something entirely new as far as we Episcopalians in this Diocese are concerned. The new creation became St. John's Church, Federated. . . .

"We are all to share in a common support of the whole church, we shall do what we can to feel and act like members of a common church family, we shall vote and take counsel in the joint committee in relation to the problems of the church as a whole. . . .

"You can well imagine how a child in coming from a comparatively empty structure seating 800 and a church school of 40 will rejoice in fellowship with a church school of 180, in a newly decorated and more compact building. Children love the association of other children more than that of empty pews.

"While we rejoice in all these practical aspects of the new federation such as efficiency, economy and increased fellowship, we are even happier in that we are in a laboratory for the purpose of discovering the answer to the question, 'Can Christians of various denominations get along together?'

"We sincerely hope and pray that the answer will be in the affirmative. Present indications are that it will be, for all the meetings leading up to and finally within the Federation, have been marked by both unanimity and congeniality."

In summary, I will say that experimental projects in Massachusetts are showing results in an improved ministry, savings of many thousands of dollars, unprecedented measures adopted by old city churches, a forward-looking spirit in what were formerly discouraged and dying congregations, and the establishment of new churches in strategic areas without competitive waste.

Music and art, budgets and modern accounting methods have all been brought into the service of Christ. Why should we not use the tools of modern research to help bring the gospel of Christ to the world today? Here is ecumenicity far removed from Amsterdam and Geneva. It is an adventure in ecumenicity in our own backyard.

